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MEMOIR

OF THE

COUNTRY ABOUT THE HEADS

OF THE

Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers,

WITH

A PLAN FOR CONNECTING IT

By a Military Road

WITH THE PLATTE ROAD,

BY

Henry E. Maynadier,

U. S. ARMY.

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MEMOIR.

THE region lying about the sources of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers is comparatively unknown. Few of the old trappers who were accustomed to spend their time on the numerous feeders of these streams are now living, and the most that is known is what has been obtained by preliminary explorations and general observation.

That part of which I propose to treat may be called the valley of the Big Horn and Yellowstone. After passing the Black Hills, the country dips to the north, so that the waters flowing into the Yellowstone are reached within a short distance from the Platte, the divide being a low, sandy ridge.

Here the character of the country begins to change from the dry sage plains, into rolling, grassy hills, stretching up towards the Big Horn Mountains, and becoming gradually as rough and rocky as themselves. This section of the country is supplied most abundantly with water, wood, and grass. From every ravine comes a stream of pure, fresh water, which streams are the upper tributaries of Powder and Tongue Rivers.

These streams form no obstruction to traveling, while they afford numerous camping places, well supplied with wood and water.

The valley of the Big Horn, from its emergence from the northern end of the north canon is broad, level, and densely wooded with cottonwood. The river is fordable at low water in many places, having a good bottom and a gentle current. A high ridge covered with a growth of pine fills the sharp angle or point made by the junction of the Yellowstone and Big Horn.

The valley of the Yellowstone is bounded on the south by a range of high and rocky mountains, called the Snow Mountains.

The axis of this range is nearly east and west, tending to the south, and joins the great curve of the Big Horn Mountains at its western extremity. Clark's Fork, the principal southern tributary of the Yellowstone, west of the Big Horn, flows through the valley between the two ranges.

The other southern tributaries are numerous, but not large, swift mountain torrents, separated by spurs trending to the north-east.

After thus skirting this range, the river turns to the south and enters a gorge, which no man has ever yet passed into.

The northern side of the valley of the Yellowstone is a table land of slight elevation, well timbered with pine, and broken by numerous ravines. The tributaries from the north are short, as the main flow is towards the Muscle-Shell River.

There are on the north side many fine bottoms well covered with grass and cottonwood, while the numerous islands are thickly grown.

On the south side of the snow range, and within the curve of the Big Horn Mountains, there is a region of unbroken sterility. Excepting in a few small bottoms of the Big Horn River, there is not a blade or bush, and the streams are of the most troublesome character. There are some burning mountains, which emit a disagreeable, sulphurous smell, giving the name of Stinking to a creek in which, in 1860, I lost a team and other valuable property.

For two months I wandered through that desolate, barren place, seeking a pass. But finding none, I was compelled to climb over the mountains and take the valley of Clark's Fork to the Yellowstone.

But with all its barrenness, the head caverns and gulches of the Stinking, Grey Bull, Owl, and Sage Creeks, are said to be rich in gold and other valuable minerals. They have heretofore been too remote from any source of supply to explore, but the settlements now being made on the head of the Missouri, will be near enough for parties to fit out from and return to.

It is not practicable to explore or prospect earlier than the 1st of July, on account of high water, nor is it safe to remain later than the 1st of October, on account of snow.

The various spurs of the Snow Mountains on the north, and the streams rising in them, are easy of access by footmen and pack mules, and offer the largest promises of value and wealth.

The geological character of the ranges, the character of the streams, and all indications of the structure of the country, are very similar--indeed, identical with those where large discoveries of gold have been made.

There is at present no route by land to this section, and to Gallatin City, from the Eastern States, except by the Platte and South Pass, and thence north by Fort Hall. This is a circuitous, long, and rough road, and has been adopted only because it was already in existence, when the interests of the new settlements made communication with them necessary.

There is great and pressing necessity for new means of communicating with Idaho and its thriving new settlements; besides, roads are the forerunners of civilization, and serve to develop and improve a country more than any other means.

The question then is, can a good, permanent, military wagon road be constructed from any of the present outfitting towns on the Missouri to Gallatin City, and, if so, what will be its best location?

The answer is yes, and I can give it, not from surmise or hearsay, but actual knowledge, obtained by exploration and survey, with excellent instruments and materials.

Let us say that an emigrant or a traveler sets out from Omaha, destined for the head of the Missouri, or Bannack City, or any point of Idaho or Washington.

From Omaha to Deer Creek on the Platte River, one hundred miles beyond Fort Laramie, the road has been traveled for years, and is as good as a turnpike. At Deer Creek the road I propose will diverge from the Platte road, and, passing the low divide, in forty miles reach the head of Powder River, and the commencement of the foot slopes of the Big Horn Mountains--skirting these it would enter the valley of Big Horn, and proceed down that river to its mouth.

This we will call the southern section of our road. It is

about four hundred miles long, and differs from most roads in a mountain country, because it does not follow the valley of a stream, but passes each day from one to another over low rolling hills, except that portion of it in the valley of the Big Horn.

Although no road has ever been made, six mule wagons were carried over this portion, from the mouth of Big Horn to Deer Creek, in 1859, without difficulty. The only work to be done would be a few grades at crossings of streams, and a comparatively small quantity of cutting.

All necessary material, such as stone, timber, &c., can be found on the line of the road.

The northern section, extending from the mouth of Big Horn to the head of the Missonri, would follow the course of the Yellowstone, lying principally in the bottoms, and occasionally crossing a spur, until it reached Shield's River by a tributary, of which it would enter Lodge Pole Pass.

This pass, in the range separating the Yellowstone and Missouri, presents great advantages, and it would require but little labor to convert it into an easy road.

The ascent and descent are gradual, and are afforded by the valleys of two streams, one flowing into Shield's River, the other into Gallatin fork of the Missouri. It is eighteen miles long, and would require about nine miles of cutting and grading in various places.

From the outlet of the pass the road would follow the Gallatin fork over a level plain to Gallatin City, from which roads already run to the various towns and settlements of Washington and Oregon.

The distance from mouth of Big Horn to Gallatin is 350 miles, making the whole distance from Deer Creek to Gallatin, 750 miles.

An inspection of a map will show the proposed road; as a whole, extending from Omaha City to Gallatin, in a very direct line, 700 miles being already available, and 750 to be constructed over a country already surveyed, and known to offer great advantages.

The country to which it would be an avenue, presents the

finest prospects for mineral wealth, and already enterprising men from the Pacific are commencing to examine it.

The nearest point to Gallatin to which freight can be got from the Eastern States is Fort Benton, but from thence there is a long road to be travelled. Besides, the great mass of people who migrate to the newly opened countries prefer land travel. With their own teams and provisions, they are at no expense while traveling, and time is a matter of little moment.

The journey can be made in 90 days easily.

A considerable portion of the country through which the road would pass could be profitably used for farming and grazing. The winters are mild and even, and no difficulty is experienced in wintering cattle in any of the valleys.

I am of opinion that the road could be made in a season, if the requisite means could be furnished in time. The preliminary preparations should be commenced early in March, and it would require a month to obtain laborers and supplies, and organize working parties.

This would enable a start to be made in April, from St. Louis, which is as early as the navigation commences.

Then, by using several parties at once, and operating at many points, the work could be done by the first of October, when the laborers could be sent into the States or left at Gallatin.

It is no part of my present plan to give detailed estimates of costs, or any minute plan of operations. That can be done hereafter, at any moment, and I am now simply desirous of awakening an interest in a section of country which is too valuable to be allowed longer to lie closed up and unknown.

My official duties led me to a knowledge of those things of which I have written, and my duty as a citizen, and one desirous to add, even a trifle, to the advancement and prosperity of my country, requires that I should make them known.

HENRY E. MAYNADIER,

U. S. Army.

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